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### Serving the World Through Wisdom

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## **Serving the World through Wisdom: Revitalizing Wisdom Traditions in Christian Faith**

PETER JONKERS

### **Introduction**

The fundamental conviction that underlies this chapter is that the future of the Church depends on its ability to respond to the needs of the world in their broadest sense. As I argued elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> this does not mean that the Church should accommodate the essence of its message to the mundane needs of the world, since Christians are called to be *in*, not *of* the world. Yet this catchphrase does imply that the Church should open itself to the needs of the world, and not turn its back on the world, e.g., by blaming the world for not listening.<sup>2</sup> Since these needs vary in the course of time, every new generation of Christian faithful has to answer the question how to respond to these needs in new, creative ways in order to be truly ‘in the world’. In the context of today’s West-European societies, this means that the Church has to ask itself how it can fulfill its missionary task amidst an ongoing exculturation of Christian faith,<sup>3</sup> and of having become a (small) minority church.<sup>4</sup> The very nature of this mission implies

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Jonkers, “From Rational Doctrine to Christian Wisdom,” *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers (eds.) (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015), pp. 163-168.

<sup>2</sup> George McLean, “Renewing the Church in a Secular Age,” *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age: Holistic Dialogue and Kenotic Vision*, Charles Taylor, José Casanova, George F. McLean and João J. Vila-Chã (eds.) (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016), p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Danièle Hervieu-Léger states that “the exculturation of Catholicism as a global historical matrix of French culture seems more and more evident.” I think that this aspect of the French situation is paradigmatic for all West-European countries. See: Danièle Hervieu-Léger, “Mapping the Contemporary Forms of Catholic Religiosity,” *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, Charles Taylor, José Casanova and George F. McLean (eds.) (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> This is the main conclusion of the empirical part of our book: Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers (eds.), *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, pp. 21-160.

that the Church should not confine itself to preaching to the converted, but reach out to society as a whole, even though it is predominantly secular. In order to do so, it is, as a first step, necessary to get a clear idea of people's religious and/or spiritual convictions, practices, and needs, an analysis that, for practical reasons, will be limited in this paper to Western Europe (section 2). The aim of this section will be to show that a fundamental expectation that Charles Taylor elaborated in his book *A Secular Age* concerning the future of religion and church has not materialized. Taylor expected that, even in modern, secular societies, people would be willing to move beyond their unspecified longing for spiritual wholeness, and transform this longing into a search for holiness. If this were the case, the churches could respond to this trend through a renewed religious offer that is nevertheless still relatively close to their traditional spirituality. However, not only is church membership dwindling, but also the connection between people's spiritual needs and beliefs and the core elements of religious traditions have become much looser. This has led to a dissolution of the religious field as a whole and to the rise of so-called self-spirituality, which is at odds with essential elements of Christian religion.

As will be shown in section 3, this move from Christian orthodoxy over unbound forms of religious spirituality towards self-spirituality confronts the churches with an unprecedented situation – at least since Christianity has become the majority religion in Europe – and requires them to respond to it in far more innovative ways than before. The crucial question is whether the Church is able to rediscover in its own tradition insights and practices that respond to the existential – although not necessarily religious – needs of today's people. Without making any claim to be exhaustive, I will explore in this section whether the Christian wisdom-tradition offers such a response. It is common knowledge that Christian faith is the heir of a long tradition of divine wisdom, from the Old Testament to the writings of saints, spiritual people, and theologians of our times. It is equally well-known that there is a profound need for true wisdom, since people have always felt the need to orient themselves, including in today's world, which has lost many traditional points of reference. Against this background, it is no wonder that various traditions of wisdom, religious and secular, Christian and non-Christian, are so appealing.

Two questions need to be asked in this respect. The first one is "where [true] wisdom shall be found" (Job 28:12), and how it can be distinguished from seeming wisdom. Second, the competence to relate wisdom to the concrete reality of people's contingent lives needs to be examined. The question is how to make the transition from the one to the other in order to prevent that wise proverbs and sayings remain empty phrases, even for people who are looking for a truthful or at least plausible life-orientation

in difficult, and sometimes even tragic circumstances. Both questions are typically philosophical, since they focus not primarily on concrete instances of wisdom from various traditions, but rather explore the necessary conditions for wisdom to function as true orientation in life.

### The Role of the Churches in a Secular Landscape

#### *Taylor's Analysis of Religion and Church: A Post-Durkheimian Age*

In order to get a clearer idea of the religious landscape and the role of the churches in today's Western world, I start from Charles Taylor's pertinent insights on this matter.<sup>5</sup> He characterizes the mode under which religion appears in our times as post-Durkheimian.

The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this. [During the neo-Durkheimian mode, characteristic of early modernity,] the choice of denomination was understood to take place within a fixed cadre, say that of the Apostles' Creed, the faith of the broader 'church'. Within this framework of belief, I choose the church in which I feel most comfortable. But if the focus is going now to be on my spiritual path, thus on what insights come to me in the subtler languages that I find meaningful, then maintaining this or any other framework becomes increasingly difficult. But this means that my placing in the broader 'church' may not be that relevant for me. [...] In the new expressivist dispensation, there is no necessary embedding of our link to the sacred in any particular broader framework.<sup>6</sup>

This mode of religiosity is a manifestation of the culture expressive individualism and its ethics of authenticity. It can be defined as a mode of being according to which each of us has her own way of realizing her humanity and to live that out, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or by a religious or political authority.<sup>7</sup> Although the roots of expressive individualism date back to the Romantic period, it has become predominant in all Western societies since the second half of the twentieth

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 486-495 and pp. 505-535.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 486f.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 475.

century. According to expressive individualism, ecclesiastic religion and its focus on doctrinal questions, which dominated the neo-Durkheimian mode, were responsible for the fact that

the very point of religion is being lost in the cool distance of even impeccable intellectual orthodoxy. One can only connect with God through passion. For those who feel this, the intensity of the passion becomes a major virtue, well worth some lack of accuracy in theological formulation. In an age dominated by disengaged reason, this virtue comes to seem more and more crucial.<sup>8</sup>

This explains why there are nowadays so many people who see themselves as seekers for a meaning in life that resonates deeply inside them, as pilgrims on a quest for personal spiritual enrichment in a world marked by an 'immanent frame'.<sup>9</sup> What they are looking for is a more direct experience of the sacred, a greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth, a sense of unity and wholeness of the self, and a reclaiming of the body and its pleasures, all of which they find lacking in the institutional churches with their focus on doctrine and authority. Taylor thereby builds on an influential study by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead of 2004, according to which a spiritual revolution is taking place in Western societies.<sup>10</sup>

For Taylor, it is essential not to disqualify this new religious longing as something purely negative, i.e., as a variety of invitations to self-absorption, without any concern for anything beyond the agent, whether the surrounding society or the transcendent. Instead, this striving reflects a new understanding of the good and a fuller human flourishing, and uses religious language and images to convey it. People heed and conform to a source of significance, which ultimately transcends the life of this world.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, this striving should be valued as a truly moral ideal, more in line with what is required in our post-Durkheimian era than the traditional offering of the churches. The important conclusion that Taylor draws from these insights is that the spiritual ideal of 'wholeness' and the traditional Christian one of 'holiness' are not necessarily opposed to each

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 488f.

<sup>9</sup> See Charles Taylor, "The Church Speaks – to Whom?," *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, Charles Taylor, José Casanova and George F. McLean (eds.) (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), pp. 17-24.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 507-510.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 509. Taylor refers to the study of Heelas and Woodhead as well as the example of the religious community of Taizé.

other, since it is always possible that the former transforms into the latter.<sup>12</sup> In spite of all the flattened religious attitudes that abound in the post-Durkheimian era, there is also religious faith in the strong sense, which brings people into contact with a transcendent source of significance. What is more, the fate of this strong religious faith in the modern West depends on people's ability to transform their lives and orient them towards a transcendent reality, thus fulfilling a double criterion: "The belief in transcendent reality, on the one hand, and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing on the other."<sup>13</sup>

According to Taylor, the consequences of this post-Durkheimian mode of religiosity and its main driving force, the ethics of authenticity, for the churches are far-reaching. Churches have to operate in a societal environment, in which the barriers between different religious groups have been broken down, so that the gamut of intermediate positions has widened. Moreover, the number of people having an indeterminate belief in something beyond (e.g., an impersonal force) has also increased, thereby moving outside Christian orthodoxy. The proliferation of New Age modes of spiritual practice, of views that bridge the humanist/spiritual boundary, and of practices that link spirituality and therapy has to be interpreted as consequences of this development. At the same time, these new, fertile lands in the religious landscape go together with the overall retreat of Christendom, understood as a civilization where society and culture are profoundly informed by Christian faith as well as by the large, collective connections formed by the traditional churches.<sup>14</sup> The result of this trend is an 'unbundling' of various kinds of religious life: the traditional bundling of religious and other forms of belonging has come apart, and the same has happened to the rich bundle of spiritual and other activities within the churches.<sup>15</sup>

Following Grace Davie, Taylor describes the current religious landscape and the diminished role of the churches in it as 'believing without belonging'. He uses a metaphor to describe the dominant attitude that not only many spiritual people, but also Christians are taking towards Christian faith and the Church: Christian life

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 510.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513f. See also: Charles Taylor, "Shapes of Faith Today," *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age*, Taylor, Casanova, McLean, and Vila-Chã (eds.), p. 275.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, "Shapes of Faith Today," p. 271.

is orbiting farther out from a star which is still a key reference point. [...] This becomes evident at certain moments, for instance when people feel a desire to be connected to their past. [...] Our eccentric orbit, which normally carries us far into outer space, passes close to the original sun on those occasions. This is part of the significance [...] of the fact that our past is irrevocably within Christendom.<sup>16</sup>

Taylor thereby refers to fact that, even in secular countries, tragic events with a major societal impact (e.g., the bloodbath at a school in Erfurt, the capsizing of a ferry in the Baltic Sea, the funeral of princes Diana) are often commemorated in a church and by using religious symbols. These phenomena show "that the religious or spiritual identity of masses of people still remains defined by religious forms from which they normally keep themselves at a distance."<sup>17</sup> Another term that Taylor borrows from Davie to qualify today's religiosity as well as the changing role of the churches is 'vicarious religion'. It refers to

the relationship of people to a church, from which they stand at a certain distance, but which they nevertheless in some sense cherish; which they want to be there, partly as a holder of ancestral memory, partly as a resource against some future need (e.g., their need for a rite of passage, especially a funeral); or as a source of comfort and orientation in the face of some collective disaster.<sup>18</sup>

The above shows that Taylor is quite optimistic about the enduring importance of religiosity in general in our post-Durkheimian era, as well as about the future of religious faith in the strong sense. In order to ensure the prospects of the latter, it is essential that the Christian churches take up a new role: they have to accept the dissolution of Christendom as a matter of fact and, instead, reach out to the unbound seekers for meaning and help them to transform their general spiritual seeking into the experience of a profound source of significance, which ultimately transcends the life of this world. Taylor summarizes his answer to the question of envisioning futures of the church as follows:

[O]ur horizontal, irrevocably pluralist society, where we live together in the immanent frame, amounts to a new human predicament, one in which the church must find a different voice, analogous to its 'ac-

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 520f.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 522.

culturation' in non-European civilizations. But that doesn't mean that the Christendom past is irrelevant. Its saints and their acts form part of the network we connect to all ages and all *loci* of Christian life.<sup>19</sup>

*A West-European Perspective on the Future of Religion and Church*

Taylor recognizes that his views on the future of religion and church are influenced by his American perspective, and that the situation in Europe is a different one, thereby referring to the work of Casanova.<sup>20</sup> The latter points out that there are two main divergent patterns of how the religious landscape will evolve in the decades to come.

There is on the one hand the dynamic which is clearly predominant in many European societies, namely the transformation from homogeneous confessional church religiosity to homogeneous secularity, without any significant growth of religious pluralism (except for the one brought by immigrants). Another alternative pattern, paradigmatically represented by the United States, shows that modernization may actually be accompanied by religious revival and increasing religious pluralization with limited secularization.<sup>21</sup>

According to Taylor, this divergence

is due [...] to the fact that the impact of the age of authenticity, where seekers try to find their own spiritual path, is different in societies where the 'religious' option is dominated by one official body demanding conformity, than it is in a society where faith has been irremediably 'plural' for two centuries already. In the first context, 'religion' is tainted by its association with power and unearned authority, in the other, it is quite without this negative connotation.<sup>22</sup>

As Taylor himself also recognizes, I think that his conclusion that people can be rather easily convinced to make the transition from their vague religious and spiritual experiences towards faith in a vertical transcendence, and that they are willing to accept the guidance of the great

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, "Shapes of Faith Today," p. 279.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 522-530.

<sup>21</sup> José Casanova, "A Catholic Church in a Global Secular World," *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age*, p. 70.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, "Shapes of Faith Today," pp. 274f.



religions and churches in this transformative process is only valid for the American situation and therefore cannot be applied unreservedly to all modern societies. As I will argue in more detail below, West-European societies are likely to follow a different, far more secular path than the United States. As to the future of religion and church, this means that it is highly improbable that West-Europeans will engage in the above-mentioned transformation and accept the guidance of the main churches in this, even if the latter would be willing to accommodate their offering to the spiritual needs of the people.

Recent empirical research<sup>23</sup> seems to confirm that West-European societies are evolving towards a state of general indifference to religion and spirituality, thereby underpinning Casanova's first pattern.<sup>24</sup> Hence, it is quite probable that the Christian past as a normative, transcendent frame of reference is unable to serve as an effective and broadly accepted force towards spiritual transformation. West-European societies are going through a process of exculturation of Christian faith and of a decreasing interest in spiritual matters in the strict sense. Obviously, this does not mean that Taylor's ideas about the prospects of religious faith in the strong

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<sup>23</sup> My main sources are: Nienke Moor, "Religious Vitality and Church Attendance in Europe," in *Value Contrasts and Consensus in Present-Day Europe. Painting European Moral Landscapes*, Wil Arts and Loek Halman (eds.) (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 213-230; David Voas and Stefanie Doebler, "Secularization in Europe: An Analysis of Inter-Generational Religious Change," in *Value Contrasts and Consensus in Present-Day Europe*, Arts and Halman (eds.) (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 231-250; Joep de Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband. Godsdienstige ontwikkelingen in Nederland* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2014), p. 149; Loek Halman, "Patterns of European Religious Life," in *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, Hellemans and Jonkers (eds.), pp. 21-70; Joep de Hart and Paul Dekker, "Floating believers: Dutch seekers and the Church," in *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, Hellemans and Jonkers (eds.), pp. 71-96; Staf Hellemans, "Imagining the Catholic Church in a World of Seekers," in *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, Hellemans and Jonkers (eds.), pp. 129-160; Ton Bernts and Joantine Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966-2015* (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2016), p. 224. Although some of these publications focus on the development of the churches and religiosity in the Netherlands, they regularly compare this with other West-European countries. From this, they conclude that similar developments are taking place in other West-European countries. See De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, pp. 23-25.

<sup>24</sup> De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, pp. 120f.; Bernts and Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966-2015*, pp. 41-44. In particular, these authors conclude that the 'spiritual revolution', predicted by Heelas and Wuthnow, has not taken place in Western Europe.

sense and the role of the churches would be obsolete; rather it is to be expected that the societal impact of this kind of religiosity in Western Europe remains limited.

The heading, under which I want to substantiate these claims about the current (and future) outlook of the West European religious landscape is 'dissolving religion(s)'. First, *dissolving religions* refers to the fact that religious denominations become less identifiable, so that the traditional clear division of the religious field is receding. Although more than half of the West Europeans consider themselves as religious persons,<sup>25</sup> the main churches, which are the guardians of the religious identity of a denomination and its demarcation from other ones are clearly in decline.<sup>26</sup> A first explanation of this development is the fact that church-membership counts less and less as an identity-marker and is replaced by a wide range of other characteristics, such as social class, education, ethnicity, language etc. Moreover, a power reversal has taken place between the institutional churches and the individual faithful: individuals nowadays decide autonomously whether they want to be a church member, and they experience church membership and being religious as only one out of many options. Additionally, the religious option is becoming a marginal one, and has to be justified vis-à-vis the predominant secular option.<sup>27</sup> This shows that the churches are no longer in a monopoly or oligopoly position, but have become competitors on a turbulent religious market with a very diverse supply.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the most recent data show that the ritual function of the churches – including at pivotal moments in life – and their normative

<sup>25</sup> Halman, "Patterns of European Religious Life," pp. 47f.; De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, p. 24 and p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> Moor, "Religious Vitality and Church Attendance in Europe," p. 214; Voas and Doebler, "Secularization in Europe," p. 240; Halman, "Patterns of European Religious Life," pp. 48f. and pp. 63f.; De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, pp. 65-68; Bernts and Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966-2015*, p. 23 and p. 25 and p. 51. However, it has to be noted that the 'market share' of the churches in terms of membership and impact is by far the largest in comparison to all other major societal organizations. On an average Sunday, more people in the Netherlands go to church than to a football-match in the premier and the first league together. Moreover, church members do far more charity work, including for non-religious organizations, than other societal groups. See: De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, pp. 35-37 and pp. 43f. See also: Halman, "Patterns of European Religious Life," p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> See Hans Joas, "The Church in a World of Options," *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age*, Taylor, Casanova, McLean, and Vilã-Chã (eds.), pp. 89-91.

<sup>28</sup> Hellemans, "Imagining the Catholic Church in a World of Seekers," pp. 131-3; Voas and Doebler, "Secularization in Europe," p. 248; De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, pp. 31f.

role – as the guardian of norms and values – for society as a whole is clearly declining, especially in the last decade and even among church members.<sup>29</sup> This means that the medium term validity of Davie's (and Taylor's) thesis of the enduring importance of vicarious religion in a secular society is doubtful, since it may describe only a temporary phase.

The phenomenon of dissolving religions not only concerns the diminishing role of the churches in society, but also the profound changes in the religious convictions of the faithful. They become manifest in the changing proportion between religious dwellers and seekers, especially among the church members.<sup>30</sup> Let us start from Taylor's idea that seeking has become a general characteristic of the 'individualized individuals' of our time. Although there are plenty of reasons to argue that the term 'seekers' indeed applies generically to the overall attitude of today's people, it is important to realize that the empirically demonstrable group of people who are actively seeking spiritual growth in various (religious) traditions without belonging to any of the traditional churches, is a (small) minority.<sup>31</sup> Actually, the non-active seekers and the religious indifferent form the overall majority of the population in secularized Western Europe.<sup>32</sup> Yet, when one abstracts from whether or not the seekers belong to one of the churches, and defines them in a more general way as those who are looking for 'new spiritual vistas' and deeper spiritual insights, they form the majority of all religious people. Most of them draw substantially, but selectively from the Christian heritage, and sparsely from other religious traditions, but emphasize above all the personal character of their religion. Many of them even think that a church is not necessary in order to be religious, since they are not in search of a doctrine, but rather are looking for deep experiences on the path of their personal spiritual journey.<sup>33</sup> For obvious reasons, this attitude applies most strongly to nonchurch-affiliated seekers, but many church members take this stance too.<sup>34</sup> Their beliefs, moral attitudes, etc. are becoming vaguer, reflecting less and less the doctrines of the denominations to which they belong, so that these doctrines have lost their role as religious identity markers.

A second feature of religiosity in the post-Durkheimian era is *dissolving religion*, meaning that the religious field as a whole is dissolving

<sup>29</sup> Bernts and Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966-2015*, pp. 54-56.

<sup>30</sup> See Hellemans and Jonkers, "Introduction" *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, pp. 4-7, as well as the individual chapters of that volume.

<sup>31</sup> Halman, "Patterns of European Religious Life," p. 38 and p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45. De Hart and Dekker, "Floating Believers," pp. 72f.; De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> De Hart and Dekker, "Floating Believers," pp. 82f. and p. 85.

into a wider sphere of well-being, happiness, and consumption.<sup>35</sup> Although the demarcations between the religious and the non-religious domain have never been sharp, the borders between them have become much vaguer still since the turn of the century: when people define themselves as 'a religious or a spiritual person', they are referring to an ever widening sphere of interest, of which Christian faith is only a part. This sphere ranges from traditional Christian spirituality over the spirituality of non-Christian religions (e.g., Zen-meditation) to so-called new spiritualities, such as yoga, New Age, certain psycho-therapeutic techniques, visiting wellness centers, music festivals etc.<sup>36</sup> In addition to this, there is a host of specialized magazines, websites, fairs, informal groups etc., through which people can get information and connect with like-minded. This illustrates that vertical and horizontal transcendence are merging or, to phrase it more concretely, that the difference between the religious domain in the strict sense and all kinds of 'human interest' matters is fading. The growing popularity of the phenomenon of self-spirituality is pointing in the same direction. It is defined as

the belief that in the deeper layers of the self one finds a true, authentic and sacred kernel, basically 'unpolluted' by culture, history and society, that informs evaluations of what is good, true and meaningful. Those evaluations, it is held, cannot be made by relying on external authorities or experts, but only by listening to one's 'inner voice': What lies within – experienced by way of 'intuition', 'alignment' or an 'inner voice' – serves to inform the judgments, decisions and choices required for everyday life.<sup>37</sup>

Self-spirituality is further characterized by a strong self-validation (contrary to the institutional validation of the churches), a focus on the individual self, and by relying on subjective certainty as criterion for the truth of one's conviction.<sup>38</sup> This means that the 'spiritual revolution', on which Heelas and Woodhead (and Taylor) based their optimistic views

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<sup>35</sup> For an explanation of this term see Staf Hellemans, "Imagining the Catholic Church in a World of Seekers," pp. 134f.

<sup>36</sup> Bernts and Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966-2015*, p. 149.

<sup>37</sup> Dick Houtman, Stef Aupers and Willem de Koster (eds.), *Paradoxes of individualization: social control and social conflict in contemporary modernity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 36f. Quoted in: De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, p. 100.

<sup>38</sup> De Hart and Dekker, "Floating Believers," p. 89; De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, pp. 97-99 and pp. 101f. and p. 127; Bernts and Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966-2015*, pp. 150f.

about the future of religion, seems to be over and has been replaced by a dominant secularity, combined with an ever vaguer veil of human interest matters, of which religious spirituality is only one.

The multifaceted phenomenon of dissolving religion(s) shows that the prospects of religious faith in the strong sense and those of the churches look rather weak, especially as far as the West-European situation is concerned. When we tie in again with Taylor's analysis of the post-Durkheimian era, what essentially distinguishes the strong, vertical manifestations of religious faith from horizontal spiritualities is the effective presence of a normative, vertically transcendent frame of reference. Typically, this frame is offered by the traditional churches, thus enabling people to transform their lives in a way that goes beyond ordinary human flourishing. However, the ongoing dissolution of the religious landscape as a whole in Western Europe offers a strong indication that Taylor's expectation that people would make rather easily the transition from spiritual wholeness to Christian holiness seems to be less and less realistic in this part of the world. In particular, although many aspects of the definition of self-spirituality correspond with Taylor's idea of post-Durkheimian religiosity, the strong focus on the *self* indicates that the relation to a vertical transcendence and normative frameworks is weak. Therefore, not only the prospects of religious faith in the strong sense are rather feeble, but also those of the churches, in particular their acceptability by secular societies in Western Europe to serve as a determining force in transforming people's lives.

### **A Church Which Serves the World through Wisdom**

Against this background, the question arises how the Church can serve the world in West-European societies, which are not only post-Durkheimian, but also increasingly post-Christian, and have turned away from most expressions of vertical transcendence.<sup>39</sup> It is hardly realistic to expect that the Church will be able (to continue) to play its traditional transformative role. However, since resigning itself to the general indifference to religion would run counter to the Church's missionary character, its only option is to find alternative ways to serve the world on the basis of the tradition of faith, which she passes on from generation to generation. In this section, I want to explore one of these alternative ways, namely Christian faith as an exemplification of wisdom.<sup>40</sup> In order to introduce the relevan-

<sup>39</sup> Hellemans and Jonkers, "Introduction," pp. 3f.

<sup>40</sup> This section builds on: Peter Jonkers, "From Rational Doctrine to Christian Wisdom," pp. 163-191; Peter Jonkers, "A Serving Church: Overcoming Polari-

ce of the Christian wisdom-tradition for today's people, let us start with a short analysis of the normative uncertainty that marks the current social climate.

*The Need for Wisdom in Times of Normative Uncertainty*

According to Durkheim, normative uncertainty is latently present in all modern societies, since individual and societal moral norms are not derived anymore from an eternal divine order or an immutable natural law, but depend on the contingencies of societal recognition. Therefore, it is no surprise that the great variety of norms and values and the speed, with which they are changing cause a dominant feeling of normative uncertainty among secular people as well as church members.<sup>41</sup> Another important element that explains the current normative uncertainty has to do with the fact that some of the predictions of the modernization theory on moral issues have not come true. This theory predicted the emergence and diffusion of an ethos of individualism and instrumentalism in all modern societies, as well as a procedural, rational, and universalist ethics, combined with the fading away of all kinds of social discrimination. The expected result was a society, in which cultural and religious differences would be irrelevant, so that conflicts over substantial values would belong to a distant past.

However, in contrast to this prediction we see that cultural and religious traditions continue to leave a lasting imprint on the worldviews and values in all European societies. These traditions are especially important in those domains where modernization has eroded the functional basis of traditional moral rules, without being able to provide plausible new ones, as the example of the care for the sick and elderly shows. Another persisting problem of modern societies is that moral rules, which seem at first sight universal and rational, lose their self-evidence when people try to apply these rules when being confronted with concrete moral dilemmas.<sup>42</sup> What has made this problem even worse is the fact that these universal principles tend to become ever more formal (or abstract) and procedural, while the moral decisions that people have to take in concrete situations become more and more entangled. In sum, there is a gap between the uni-

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zation Through Wisdom" *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age*, Taylor, Casanova, McLean and Vilă-Chă (eds.), pp. 229-252.

<sup>41</sup> De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, p. 42.

<sup>42</sup> Hermann Dülmer, "Modernization, Culture and Morality in Europe: Universalism, Contextualism or Relativism?," *Value Contrasts and Consensus in Present-Day Europe*, Arts and Halman (eds.), p. 257.

versal, but formal moral principles of modernity and the culture-specific values that people used to take as guidance in their concrete moral behaviour, while it becomes clear at the same time that the former have not been able to replace the latter.

Confronted with this problem, it is no wonder that we witness a growing popularity of so-called virtue-ethics. This kind of ethics rests on substantial – rather than procedural – values, which are theoretically underpinned and existentially nourished by a (religious or secular) tradition, consisting of (old and contemporary) stories, doctrines, rituals, and experiences that exemplify the good life. Typically, people form communities around these value-traditions and let their lives be inspired and orientated by them. Another important element of these value-traditions is that they have a longstanding experience in practical wisdom, which is precisely aimed at bridging the gap, characteristic of moral life as such, between abstract universality and concrete particularity. Because this gap has become acute in all contemporary Western societies, it comes as no surprise that the need for this kind of wisdom is increasing.

As is commonly known, wisdom has always been part and parcel of the Christian tradition: one only needs to think of the wisdom books of the Old Testament, over the sayings of Jesus and the life stories of people who follow his example, to the wisdom embedded in pastoral counseling in our times. In my view, this aspect of the Christian tradition connects better with the above analyzed predicament of contemporary societies than betting on the Church's guiding role in transforming people's spirituality from wholeness to holiness, which largely depends on the questionable assumption of the continuing impact of the spiritual revolution on secular societies. Because all people, regardless whether they are religious or not, experience normative uncertainty as well as the gap between universal moral principles and concrete practices, the need for a truthful or at least plausible orientation in all kinds of moral and existential issues is a fundamental one. Hence, through its tradition of Christian wisdom the Church can render an invaluable service to the world of today, in particular by offering this wisdom as a truthful life orientation and by educating pastors whose counsels are inspired by this tradition, thus enabling people to find a plausible answer to moral dilemmas.

In this context, two important underlying problems crop up that need to be addressed by every wisdom-tradition, including the Christian one. First, all these traditions, religious and secular, old and more recent ones, claim to be exemplars of *true* wisdom, in particular claim that the wisdom they offer is not limited to the here and now, but connects people's lives

with ideas, images, and practices of the good life in general.<sup>43</sup> Yet, since these claims can be false, every wisdom-tradition is in need of a critical self-examination in order to purify itself. Moreover, because modern societies are by definition pluralist, what is also needed is an external critique of what presents itself as wisdom, preferably on the basis of a rationality that is not disenchanting or reductionist with regard to these traditions, but accepts the need for true wisdom as a fundamental human striving. Second, the plea for a revaluation of the Christian wisdom tradition should not be misunderstood as a plea to return to a premodern religious homogeneity. Given the pluralist character of modern society, the Church has to accept the fact that Christian wisdom is but one among many (religious as well as secular) wisdom traditions. This factual plurality makes it imperative for the Church to offer its treasure of wisdom to all people without allowing itself to be led astray by taking an exclusivist attitude towards other wisdom traditions.

In order to further develop how Christian wisdom can serve the world, I will first give a description of the main characteristics of wisdom in general as well as of Christian wisdom. Then, a specific condition for Christian wisdom to serve today's secular world effectively will be discussed, namely how to connect the general principles of Christian wisdom with the particular, concrete lives of people.

### *Wisdom*

If there is one thing that has fascinated civilizations around the globe, secular as well as religious ones, for thousands of years, it is wisdom. Because of its rarity wisdom has been compared with precious stones, and some people even think that wisdom is something essentially divine, beyond the grasp of human beings. Hence, it is no surprise that religions around the world, from Hinduism over the mythologies of ancient Egypt and Greece to those of Northern Europe, from Buddhism and Taoism over Zoroastrianism to Judaism and Christianity, abound with divine revelations of wisdom. They have permeated the history of humankind with stories and legends about and sayings of wise men and women, as becomes apparent from the eight 'immortals' in ancient China, the seven sages of Greece and Rome, the wise men from the East who came to adore the child Jesus,<sup>44</sup> the rishis of India, and the five Sufi sages in the Islam.

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<sup>43</sup> Trevor Curnow, *Wisdom. A History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), pp. 186f.

<sup>44</sup> For Barton, this is a paradigmatic story of the quest of the nations for wisdom and of the revelation of true wisdom in a place, where no-one expected it. See:



Finally, and on more implicit level, there is a lot of wisdom present in the literature of all cultures of the world.<sup>45</sup>

However, although this enumeration shows that wisdom is a common element of nearly all civilizations and something that people have always been striving for, it is very hard to define wisdom unambiguously. According to Plato and Aristotle, as well as many philosophers of (early) modernity, like Descartes, Leibniz, Fichte, and Hegel, wisdom is primarily a theoretical knowledge of the first principles. This explains why wisdom is sometimes identified with science; scientism, in particular, is convinced that only science is able to solve all problems of individuals and society.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, according to Aristotle there is also another kind of wisdom, namely practical wisdom, which is vital in moral issues, that is when one has to apply general insights about the good life to individual situations. Epicurus also approaches wisdom as practical matter, considering it as a constitutive element of a pleasant life. In his view, wisdom consists in liberating oneself from fears and desires as well as from the thought-lessness linked to all false opinions. According to the Stoa, wisdom comes down to disciplining one's natural inclinations, goals in life and thinking.<sup>47</sup> Augustine, in contrast, believes that wisdom resides in God, so that humans can only attain it by humbly following Christ who is the one and only Mediator between God and them.<sup>48</sup>

Although this variety shows that a clear definition of wisdom is impossible, there are nevertheless a number of family-resemblances between what different cultures understand by this term. Generally speaking, wisdom offers an encompassing, theoretical or practical understanding of how to orient one's life, based on human experience or divine revelation.<sup>49</sup>

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Stephen C. Barton, "Gospel Wisdom," *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church and the Contemporary World*, Stephen C. Barton (ed.) (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p. 95.

<sup>45</sup> For a broad, cross-cultural, historical overview of wisdom, see Curnow, *Wisdom*.

<sup>46</sup> For an analysis of the (problematic) fate of wisdom in modern philosophy, see Peter Jonkers, "A Revaluation of Wisdom as a Way to Reconnect Philosophy With the Life-World," *Philosophy and the Life World*, He Xirong, Peter Jonkers, and Shi Yongze (eds.) (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2017), pp. 41-62.

<sup>47</sup> For an overview of the manifold meanings of wisdom, see: Andreas Speer, "Weisheit" *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Band 12 (2005), pp. 371-397.

<sup>48</sup> Carol Harrison, "Augustine, Wisdom and Classical Culture," *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* Stephen C. Barton (ed.), p. 137.

<sup>49</sup> Speer, "Weisheit," p. 371.

This means, first, that wisdom is essentially based on a profound insight in what is true and good, not only for oneself, but for all people. This distinguishes true wisdom from self-conceit, and true prophets from false ones. Although true wisdom essentially includes a profound self-critique of its own digressions, it has also always been philosophy's task to separate the wheat of true wisdom from the chaff of ideology, superstition, fanaticism, etc.

Second, although a profound insight in the true nature of things and human beings is essential for wisdom, it is certainly not identical with ordinary factual knowledge. Someone who knows all kinds of petty facts, who gives all the right answers in a hypothetical quiz about everything, is not deemed wise at all. Rather, wise people are those who can see the bigger picture, whose horizons are broadest, whose vision is clearest, who live in the light.<sup>50</sup> Yet, wise people not only need to have a broad vision, but also have to be able to relate it in a meaningful way to a particular moral or existential situation of concrete individuals or societies. Hence, it is no surprise that the need for wisdom crops up most often in situations where factual knowledge and (technical) know-how come up against questions of ethics, values, beauty, the shaping and flourishing of the whole person, the common good, and long-term perspectives.<sup>51</sup> This explains why one of the most intricate difficulties of wisdom, namely to relate in a meaningful way a broad, theoretical vision of the good life in general with a particular, practical situation, is often addressed by presenting wisdom through a narrative. Many stories of religious and secular world-literature derive their lasting impact precisely from the fact that they offer a wealth of profound insights in existential and moral matters through recounting the concrete experiences of individual people and communities.

Third, as a life orienting kind of knowledge, wisdom is principally *about* people. It also stems *from* people, since wisdom is above all manifested in and derives its source from wise people, even if they are mediators of divine wisdom. In connection with the previous point, this means that what makes these people wise is that they are able to connect general wise insights with whatever life throws at people in the particularity and complexity of their day-to-day lives.<sup>52</sup> Just reciting wise sayings without being able to connect them with or apply them to people's specific situations is anything but wise, but rather manifests a hubris of reason.

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<sup>50</sup> Curnow, *Wisdom*, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> David Ford, *Christian Wisdom. Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Curnow, *Wisdom*, p. 9.

Yet the reverse is also true: someone who is only sensitive to the complexities of people's concrete situations, but is unable to take into account the importance of moral principles as objective standards of the good life, yields to the illusions of the heart, and is not considered wise either.<sup>53</sup>

In order to illustrate the role and importance of both aspects of wisdom and their mutual relation, it is helpful to draw an analogy between geographical and life-orientation.<sup>54</sup> In both cases, there is an obvious subjective need for orientation, namely to avoid to get lost geographically or to go astray existentially or morally. Moreover, both kinds of orientation consist in linking the specific situation of a person or community to some general rules or principles. In order to orient myself in a city, region, or country I need first of all an external, fixed point of reference, in relation to which I can situate myself. This can be the sun or the Pole Star, the satellites of the GPS, a road- or city-map, etc. In a similar vein, in order to orient myself in life I need first of all an external, stable point of reference, with the help of which I can put my life in perspective. Traditionally, the fundamental insights of religions and the exemplary life-stories of saints have played the role of such a reference point. In the case of geographical orientation, the second step is to link this external point of reference with the specific point where I am. In the case of existential or moral orientation, I also need to determine as accurately as possible the contingencies of my personal situation in relation to moral reference points. Hence, the analogy between geographical and existential (or moral) orientation consists in that both are a matter of combining an external point of reference with an accurate assessment of the specific situation of the person who has to orient herself.

Yet there are also some fundamental differences between geographical and existential or moral orientation. Whereas the objectivity of geographical points of reference is unproblematic, and the person who needs to orient herself can determine most of the times her specific location unambiguously, the objectivity of existential points of reference and the univocity to define our specific situation in relation to them when orientating ourselves morally or existentially raise fundamental problems. In our pluralist era, there are many divergent, and even competing points of

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<sup>53</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 241.

<sup>54</sup> I developed this point earlier with the help of Kant's essay *What does it mean: to Orientate Oneself in Thinking?*, in which he also draws an analogy between geographical and moral orientation. See: Peter Jonkers, "Redefining Religious Truth as a Challenge for Philosophy of Religion," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4, 4 (2012), pp. 153-158.

reference, and some of them lack stability (e.g., media stars or temporary fads), let alone objectivity. It is also difficult to determine our specific, existential situation unambiguously, because of our biases and prejudices. Finally, because of increased social mobility, the number of new existential situations in which we are in need of orientation is far greater than those of the average traveler, most of whose trips are routine. In sum, whereas geographical orientation is subjectively and objectively adequate (i.e., we need to orient ourselves and can thereby rely on objectively given points of reference), moral or existential orientation is subjectively adequate, but objectively inadequate (i.e., we need to orient ourselves, but have no universally valid, objectively given points of reference).<sup>55</sup> This explains why the quest for true wisdom is a never-ending process, why the (religious and secular) traditions that comprise these existential points of reference need to be critically examined as to their plausibility or truth, and why we need the advice of wise people in difficult existential and moral situations much more than that of live travel-guides.

### *Christian Wisdom*

In his book on Christian wisdom, David Ford describes Christianity as "at present the largest global wisdom tradition."<sup>56</sup> Characteristic of Christian wisdom is that it is God-centered, has the whole of creation as its context, is immersed in history and the contemporary world, and is constantly sought afresh with others in a community whose basic trust is that the Spirit will lead them into further truth. Since Christians believe that Jesus is God's only son, he is not only a teacher of Godly wisdom, the title by which he is most frequently addressed and referred to in the New Testament, but also wisdom incarnate, a theological claim regarding Jesus which first appeared within the early history of the transmission and development of the traditions regarding Jesus.<sup>57</sup> This means that Jesus was not just an enlightened 'wisdom teacher', memorable for his subversive parables and startling figures of speech, since such a reconstruction fails to do justice to the messianic, eschatological dimension of Jesus' kingdom proclamation, and overlooks the extent to which the wisdom which Jesus

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<sup>55</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren?," *Werke in zehn Bänden. Herausgegeben von Wilhelm Weischedel*, Band 5: *Schriften zur Metaphysik und Logik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), p. 270, footnote.

<sup>56</sup> Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> James D.G. Dunn, "Jesus: Teacher of Wisdom or Wisdom Incarnate?" *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* Stephen C. Barton (ed.), pp. 79 and 83.

teaches is a hidden heavenly wisdom, not reducible to matters of empirical observation or existential need. Rather Jesus' wisdom points to a transcendental reality discerned only by faith and in the context of obedient discipleship. Christian wisdom is not primarily a matter of existential, let alone technical or empirical knowledge, but has much more to do with mystery and revelation. It is a manifestation of the hidden life of God made known in the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God.<sup>58</sup>

The essentially divine character of Christian wisdom explains why Paul is so critical of its opposite, namely all manifestations of human or worldly wisdom and human's boasting of it as if it were the result of human knowledge alone. Therefore, Paul qualifies all worldly wisdom rather as folly in the eyes of God, thereby marking its incommensurability with Christian wisdom. Hence, from a Pauline perspective, the common approach of Christian apologists, namely to identify the culture's questions and then provide satisfying Christian answers, is counterproductive. In Paul's view, Jews nor Greeks will get the answers they seek, since they ask the wrong questions. Only by believing wholeheartedly in the story of Jesus, and accepting that one's whole life is reframed by it, one can become open to the revelation of God's wisdom.<sup>59</sup> Beyond doubt, through the belief that true wisdom can only be reached through God and Jesus as wisdom incarnate Christian wisdom differentiates most explicitly from secular wisdom.

Yet, the relation between worldly and Christian wisdom does not necessarily have to be interpreted as a sharp opposition, but can also be seen as a deepening and radicalization of secular wisdom. Starting from the family-resemblances of secular or worldly wisdom, they can be summarized as follows: as a life orienting kind of knowledge, wisdom stems from humans, who are able to see the world on the basis of a profound insight in the true and the good, and are capable of applying these insights fruitfully to the day to day concerns of concrete individuals and communities. Yet, every kind of human wisdom runs the risk to degenerate into a shallow pragmatism, thus becoming 'all too human'. Against this background, Christian wisdom can be interpreted as deepening and radicalizing secular wisdom. In particular, to stave off the risk of letting one's life be led by seeming or false wisdom and, phrased positively, to value true wisdom as much as possible, Christianity has redefined wisdom in a

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<sup>58</sup> Barton, "Gospel Wisdom," pp. 108f.

<sup>59</sup> Richard B. Hays, "Wisdom According to Paul," *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, Stephen C. Barton (ed.), pp. 122f. See also: Colin Gunton, "Christ, the Wisdom of God: A Study in Divine and Human Action," *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, Stephen C. Barton (ed.), p. 260.

radically transcendent way, to the extent that Jesus is believed to be wisdom incarnate. Hence, from a Christian perspective, wisdom does not stem from humans, but directly from God, and is mediated by Jesus. This does not mean that, from a Christian perspective, worldly or secular wisdom is by definition false or a folly, but it does mean that Christian faith radicalizes the depth and broadness of truly wise insights in the most radical way.

Turning to the wisdom-character of Christian wisdom, we can see how it relates to wisdom in general, discussed in the previous section. Christian wisdom is primarily gained from reading scripture alert to both its origins, reception and current interpretations and also to contemporary understanding and life. Much of scriptural wisdom is narrative, i.e., lies in the way the story is told, the narrative pattern and detail, the encounters and images, and the key events and statements, as becomes manifest in a paradigmatic way in the book of Job and the stories about Solomon, as well in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The narrative character of scriptural wisdom, and more in general the fact that Christian wisdom has its source in God means that it is inexhaustible and even elusive, and hence can never be fully grasped by a rational interpretation, be it theological or philosophical.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, Christian wisdom is not only embedded in narratives, but also in teachings, long-term practices, and patterns of family and community life. As a community of interpretation, the Church can be seen as a school of wisdom, since, historically and theologically, it is inextricably interwoven with scripture, tradition and worship and is the social location of the three together.<sup>61</sup> A recent example of how deep Christian wisdom is embedded in the teachings and the life of the Church is the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998), in which Pope John Paul II discusses extensively the relevance of wisdom, as related to God's revelation and human knowledge, for the ongoing intellectual debate. Since God offers his wisdom to mankind as a gift, it deserves to be meditated and asks to be accepted as a sign of God's love. "This revealed truth is set within our history as an anticipation of that ultimate and definitive vision of God which is reserved for those who believe in him and seek him with a sincere heart."<sup>62</sup> As a life orienting kind of knowledge, Christian wisdom is a unity of faith and reason. This unity means that, with the help of their reason humans can discover true wisdom to some extent, although it eventually remains a

<sup>60</sup> Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 190

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153 and p. 254.

<sup>62</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), p. 15.

mystery for them; it is only thanks to faith that humans can await God's revelation of wisdom with confidence.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, the question arises which role Christian wisdom can play in a pluralist society. Given the fact that Christian faith has lost its self-evidence and has become optional in a world full of other equally attractive options, bidding for the public's favor,<sup>64</sup> it is not realistic at all to expect that people would embrace Christian faith as their only source of wisdom. Moreover, most humans of our times feel a resistance to let themselves guide by one school of wisdom or even by any such school. Instead, they pick and choose autonomously from the (religious and secular) wisdom traditions with which they are familiar, those elements that, for the time being, fit their specific needs best. This attitude reflects quite well the fact that people see orientation in life predominantly as a matter of tinkering or 'bricolage'. The Church has to accept this reality, even though it contrasts sharply with the fact that Christian wisdom, just like all other wisdom-traditions, are encompassing wholes and result from life-experiences that have been discussed, criticized and corrected throughout the ages. Yet precisely this characteristic can be appealing to contemporary people: since they are seeking for true wisdom in a world with multiple points of reference, some of which lead them astray, it makes sense to learn from traditions that have proven their value, when people need to orient themselves in life.<sup>65</sup>

#### *How to Connect Christian Wisdom to People's Particular Situations?*

If one agrees with the conclusion of the relevance of wisdom traditions in order to give meaning and orientation to one's life, the next crucial question is how they can do so effectively. When trying to answer this question, already hinted at in the previous sections, in the case of Christian faith, this means that this kind of wisdom has to make the connection between Christian doctrine, teachings, sayings, etc. and the concrete situations in which people are leading their lives. In order to introduce this question further, I want to draw the attention to a notable difference between the manifestation of wisdom in earlier times and the present-day.

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<sup>63</sup> For an analysis of the topic of wisdom in *Fides et Ratio*, see Peter Jonkers, *Truth and Wisdom. The Significance of 'Fides et Ratio' for the Contemporary Intellectual Debate* (Rome: Publications of the Pontificia Universita Lateranese, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> See Hellemans and Jonkers, "Introduction," pp. 3f.; Hellemans, "Imagining the Catholic Church," p. 133; Joas, "The Church in a World of Options," pp. 89f.

<sup>65</sup> Pierre Hadot, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre. Entretiens avec Jeannie Carlier et Arnold I. Davidson* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), p. 165f.

Wisdom used to show itself as something rather theoretical, focused unilaterally on the universal principles of the good life, thereby failing to take into account human passions and the complexities of everyday existence. It thus appeared as a collection of abstract insights, imposed on the contingent world from above. Because of this one-sidedness wisdom often became severed from the concrete lives of people, so that it failed to orient them.<sup>66</sup> In our times, by contrast, wisdom tends to take only the spatio-temporal settings of human lives into account, thereby making itself liable to the opposite one-sidedness, namely that it does not critically examine the biases and prejudices of these settings, and does not bother to relate them to the universal teachings and principles. Consequently, such a kind of presumed wisdom risks to be nothing more than a justification of existing life-orientations.<sup>67</sup> It is clear that neither of these one-sided approaches qualifies as true wisdom, albeit because of different reasons. Their popularity, then and now, probably stems from the fact that they give humans the illusion of being able to find an easy solution, albeit in opposite ways, to the existential conflicts that haunts them each time when they try to relate general teachings of wisdom to their need for orientation in contingent situations.

In order to answer the question how to connect general principles of the good life to the contingencies of people's lives, I take Martha Nussbaum's book, *The Fragility of Goodness*, as my starting point.<sup>68</sup> In the tenth chapter of that book, she contrasts Aristotle's views of non-scientific deliberation or practical wisdom with Plato's idea of theoretical wisdom or episteme. According to Plato, moral rules form a deductive system of rationality are concerned throughout with universals; these rules are the final authorities against which particular moral decisions should be measured. Aristotle, by contrast, distinguishes between theoretical knowledge or episteme, which is about general principles and unchangeable entities, and practical wisdom, which is concerned with the ultimate particular fact.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, for Aristotle the appropriate criterion of correct choice is that the person of practical wisdom is a thoroughly human being, i.e., someone who does not attempt to take up a stand outside of the

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<sup>66</sup> Wolfgang Welsch, "Weisheit in einer Welt der Pluralität" *Philosophie und Weisheit*, Willi Oelmüller (ed.) (Paderborn, München, Wien, Zürich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1989), p. 227.

<sup>67</sup> Brenda Almond, "Seeking Wisdom: Moral Wisdom or Ethical Expertise" *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, Stephen C. Barton (ed.), p. 199.

<sup>68</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness. Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>69</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics. The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Jonathan Barnes (ed.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1142a23-4.



conditions of human life, but bases her judgment on a long and broad experience of these conditions.<sup>70</sup> This shows that Aristotle assumes the meaningfulness and value of our everyday human lives, and tries to discover an account of our underlying moral commitments, which does justice to our moral experience. He does not downplay the importance of the common good and the universal moral rules that follow from it, but recognizes that these rules are not the only standards for moral decision in contingent situations. Rather, universal rules are like the leaden ruler of Lesbian architecture, which was not rigid but could be adapted to the shape of the stone.<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, for Aristotle the values that are constitutive of a good human life are plural and incommensurable, and therefore they cannot be measured and applied univocally, as if morals were a kind of *technè*. In contrast to Plato's view, Aristotle thinks that there is no single common notion of the good that practical wisdom only needs to apply in order to pass a correct moral judgment in specific situations. Instead, the best human life should be conceived as a life inclusive of a number of different constituents, each being defined apart from each of the others and valued for its own sake; each virtue is defined separately, as something that has value in itself. To put it concretely: "If I should ask of justice and of love whether both are constituent parts of *eudaimonia* [...], I surely do not imply [...] that we are to hold them up to a single standard, regarding them as productive of some further value. [...] Something can be an end in itself and at the same time be a valued constituent in a larger or more inclusive end." To choose a value "for *its own sake* (for the sake of what it itself is) not only does not require, but is actually incompatible with, viewing it as qualitatively commensurable with other valuable items."<sup>72</sup>

All this means that, for Aristotle, principles alone fail to capture the fine detail of the concrete particular. In order to count as practical wisdom, general principles must be seized in a confrontation with the situation itself, by a faculty that is suited to confront it as a complex whole.<sup>73</sup> This faculty is practical wisdom, which is a matter of balancing between universal rule and particular situation, until one reaches a moment of equilibrium. In order to do this balancing properly, a wealth of practical experience of particular situations is needed,<sup>74</sup> since general principles as such

<sup>70</sup> Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness*, p. 290.

<sup>71</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1137b29-32.

<sup>72</sup> Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness*, p. 297.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 300f.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Song, "Wisdom as the End of Morality," *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, Stephen C. Barton (ed.), pp. 300f. This conclusion is in line with Aris-

lack the concreteness, flexibility, and respect for the complexity that is needed to judge these situations correctly. Yet, these principles have a distinct though limited usefulness. As summaries of the wise judgments of others, they are guidelines in moral development for people who do not yet possess practical wisdom and insight. These principles even guide virtuous adults in their approach to the particular, helping them to pick out its salient features. When there is no time to formulate a fully concrete decision, and to scrutinize all the features of the case at hand, it is better to follow a good summary rule than to make a hasty and inadequate concrete choice. Furthermore, rules give constancy and stability in situations in which bias and passion might distort judgment. In sum, rules are necessities because we are not always good judges.<sup>75</sup> Finally and most importantly, “the particular case would be surd and unintelligible without the guiding and sorting power of the universal. [...] Nor does particular judgment have the kind of rootedness and focus required for goodness of character without a core of commitment to a general conception – albeit one that is continually evolving, ready for surprise, and not rigid. There is in effect a two-way illumination between particular and universal.”<sup>76</sup>

For Paul Ricoeur, who has also pondered a lot on the importance of practical wisdom, but from a contemporary perspective, the rift between universal moral principles and the complexity of concrete, day-to-day life implies that ethical conflicts are inevitable. They can only be dealt with appropriately, though never solved once and for all, by ‘a moral judgment in situation’, which is the essence of practical wisdom.<sup>77</sup> Practical wisdom “consists in a capacity [...] for discerning the right rule [...] in difficult situations requiring action. The exercise of this virtue is inseparable from the personal quality of the wise human being [...]. There is a close tie between prudence and ‘singular things’.”<sup>78</sup> The need for practical wisdom arises when the universalism that is claimed by moral principles, is confronted with the recognition of the positive values belonging to the (particular) historical and communitarian contexts of the realization of these

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totle’s definition of moral virtue: “Moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, the mean relative to us, this being determined by a *logos*, the one by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it.” See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b36-7a2.

<sup>75</sup> Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness*, p. 304.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>77</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 249.

<sup>78</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Reflections on the Just* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 54.

same rules.<sup>79</sup> The characteristics of practical wisdom can be summarized as follows:

- 1) It always upholds the moral norm, although it may be applied differently according to the particulars of the situation; 2) it is the search for a just mean, less in the sense of a compromise than an attempt to find a common ground; 3) so as not to appear arbitrary, it should seek the advice of others, especially competent, wise, experienced people.<sup>80</sup>

In his study, Ricoeur gives several examples of how practical wisdom operates in these situations. Wisdom introduces equity as a corrective of the one-sided generality of the law in its application to a particular situation. "Equity [...] is another name for the *sense* of justice, when the latter traverses the hardships and conflicts resulting from the application of the *rule* of justice."<sup>81</sup> It also senses the fine dividing line in Kant's second categorical imperative that tends to separate its universalist version, represented by the idea of humanity, from its pluralist version, represented by the idea of persons as ends in themselves, and gives preference to the latter over the former in the name of the solicitude that is addressed to persons in their irreplaceable singularity.<sup>82</sup> A final example of practical wisdom concerns the current discussion of human rights which, although they have been ratified by just about every state, are nevertheless suspected of being the fruit of the cultural history of the West. In order to avoid that this discussion ends in a complete impasse, practical wisdom has an essential task: it has to assume the paradox between maintaining, on the one hand, the universal claim attached to a limited number of values, and on the other hand, to submit this claim to discussion on the level of the convictions incorporated in concrete forms of life. A wise judgment in situation consists in recognizing that other potential universals are contained in so-called exotic cultures, in admitting that there is a possible truth in the proposals of meaning that are at first foreign to us.<sup>83</sup>

All this means that the moral judgement in situation of practical wisdom remains a fragile one, always open to reconsideration, and that

<sup>79</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 274.

<sup>80</sup> David Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 113. Quoted in Marianne Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other. Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters* (Lanham/Boulder/New York/London: Lexington Books, 2014), p. 85.

<sup>81</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 262.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

practical wisdom can never propose, let alone impose one single response to people's quest for a truthful life orientation. Moreover, because such a judgment in situation has to be made in a context of plurality, the conviction that seals this judgment benefits from the plural character of the underlying debate; a wise person is not necessarily one individual alone.<sup>84</sup>

### Catholic Social Teaching as an Example of Christian Wisdom

In conclusion, I want to draw the attention to Catholic social teaching, which is, in my view, a paradigmatic example of how the Church can connect the general values of Christian faith to the specific situations of individuals and societies. According to the encyclical *Deus caritas est* "the Church's social doctrine has become a set of fundamental guidelines offering approaches that are valid even beyond the confines of the Church: in the face of ongoing development these guidelines need to be addressed in the context of dialogue with all those seriously concerned for humanity and for the world in which we live."<sup>85</sup> This quotation shows that the Church, in order to actualize the fundamental (Christian) value of justice in the lives of societies here and now, does not opt for a uniform top down or purely technical model, but rather for a dialogue with those who take its moral guidelines to heart, and look for ways to put them into practice in diverging societal contexts. Obviously, the Church's prime mission is "to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest."<sup>86</sup> Yet at the same time the Church explicitly recognizes that it is the state's responsibility to answer "the question of how justice can be achieved here and now."<sup>87</sup> Hence, in order to connect the fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching with the contingent opportunities and constraints of specific civil societies, the Church puts its trust in the prudence of men and women at a local level, thereby taking for granted that the outcome of this mediation will differ from society to society. By taking this approach, the Church values two important characteristics of practical wisdom. First, practical wisdom is a matter of wise people, who are able to prudently connect general moral principles to particular situations, thus expressing moral judgments in situation. Second,

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>85</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006), p. 27.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

the Church recognizes that these judgements are inevitably fragile ones, always open to reconsideration as a result of a more refined insight in the implications of general moral principles, or as a result of a more accurate assessment of the particular situation.

The idea of societal participation is a good example of how one of the principles of Catholic social teaching is connected with the contingencies of the social sphere. According to the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, social participation is the typical implication of the principle of subsidiarity, a principle with a long standing tradition in Catholic social teaching. This principle stipulates that “all societies of a superior order must adopt attitudes of help (“subsidium”) – therefore of support, promotion, development – with respect to lower-order societies.”<sup>88</sup> In this way, intermediate social entities can properly perform the functions that fall to them, without being absorbed and substituted by entities of a higher level, e.g., the state. The importance of this principle is that people are protected from abuse of power by a higher-level authority. In order to put this principle into practice, “appropriate methods for making citizens more responsible in actively ‘being a part’ of the political and social reality of their country are needed.”<sup>89</sup> Hence, the characteristic implication of the principle of subsidiarity is participation. The *Compendium* defines this notion as “a series of activities by means of which the citizen, either as an individual or in association with others, whether directly or through representation, contributes to the cultural, economic, political and social life of the civil community to which he belongs. Participation is a duty to be fulfilled consciously by all, with responsibility and with a view to the common good.”<sup>90</sup>

Herewith, the *Compendium* recognizes that answering the question how the principle of subsidiarity is brought about, in other words, how a participative democracy is organized, depends on the social and historical contexts of the society in which this principle is implemented. But, at the same time, the *Compendium* also stresses the universal importance of the participation: “every democracy should be participative.”<sup>91</sup> Because participation is one of the standards of a humane society, initiatives that could jeopardize it “are a source of concern and deserve careful consideration.”<sup>92</sup> Times and again, the *Compendium* warns of the dangers of inade-

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<sup>88</sup> John Paul II, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), p. 186.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

quate or incorrect practices of participation. It also expresses its concern about attitudes “that cause widespread disaffection with everything connected with the sphere of social and political life.”<sup>93</sup> The example of participation shows that the Church’s social teaching is indeed an expression of practical wisdom: this teaching makes a careful transition from a universal principle to the contextual situation of a concrete society, resulting in an inevitably fragile judgment of situation, made by people who are active in this field on a local level.

Against this background, it is no surprise that not only church-members, but also many secular people have received Catholic social teaching very positively. They appreciate not only the value of the fundamental principles of this teaching, summarized as Christian personalism, i.e., the intrinsic dignity of the human in her relation to other human beings and society, the physical world, and to God. They also admire the ways, in which countless individuals have practiced these principles, as well as the many judgments in situation, through which wise persons in sometimes very difficult and even tragic circumstances have tried to apply these principles. These observations substantiate the conviction, expressed in title of this chapter, namely that the Church can serve the world through wisdom: revitalizing wisdom traditions in Christian faith.

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

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